Communication about self-care in traditional acupuncture consultations

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Self Care defined

- "is a part of daily living. It is the care taken by individuals towards their own health and wellbeing: the actions people take to stay fit and maintain good physical and mental health"

(Dept of Health Policy and Guidance 2005)

- (in Chinese Medicine we are asking them to be more pro-active than this)
Starting Point

- Self-care is important

- What people *say* often doesn’t accord with what they *do* (*observed talk and behaviour*)

- Communication about self-care in conventional medicine is observed to be limited and ‘asymmetrical’
Aims

- To identify the characteristics of communication about lifestyle and self-care within traditional acupuncture consultations

- A reflective process to increase our awareness of our own practice (This is possibly first observational study of communication patterns within traditional acupuncture consultations?)
Preparation

- Discussing how we felt about audio-recordings and how our patients might feel ……
- …how we felt it might affect our rapport with our patients …
- Data security issues.
- Ethical clearance (Exeter University)
**Method**

- A qualitative study
- Nested within a co-operative enquiry
- Regular meetings, 2 focus groups
Data collection

- 7 practitioners (BAcC members)
- 36 audio-recordings, of which 27 transcribed consultations with 23 patients
- Telephone interviews with 15 of these patients
- Data analysis by 2 experienced qualitative researchers
- Regular practitioner/researcher discussions (co-operative enquiry) and 2 focus groups
Findings: types of talk

- Consultation as a trajectory, with 3 Acts.
- 7 categories of talk
  - self-care talk
  - symptoms talk
  - acupuncture talk (procedures & theory)
  - life-world talk
  - bio-medical talk
  - complementary therapy talk
  - ‘other’ talk

interwoven with each other and with periods of physical examination, needling and silence
Self-care talk

- Self-care talk was initiated equally by practitioner and patient
  - diet and eating practices
  - Over-the-counter medications, herbs, supplements
  - physical activity & back care
  - rest and relaxation
  - practice of therapies (including Qi Gong instruction)
  - protection from the elements (e.g. keeping warm)
  - Other

- It was threaded through consultations – without disrupting the other acupuncture tasks.
Extent of self-care talk

- Of 38 consultations that were recorded and listened to, 5 had no self-care talk (one reason for exclusion).
- Experienced practitioners engaged more in self-care talk (frequency and extent).
- Patients also varied in their preferences for self-care (telephone interviews)
  - some patients reported that they ‘like being told what to do’ whilst
  - others appreciated being given strategies that empowered them to take care of themselves.
The relationship

- Was characterised by **continuity, mutuality and trust**.

- We also conceptualised ‘permeability’ - that there are many *layers* of care contacted in treatment, and that there are many *pathways* leading to self-care, which can flow in many directions.

  - eg ‘self-care talk’ could arise from ‘symptom talk’, ‘therapeutic talk’, or ‘social talk’, facilitated by the mutual and confiding relationship.
Limitations of study

- Low budget methods eg methods of transcription, how data was collected
- Patients were mainly well-known to practitioners, fewer 1st time consultations
- Unable to observe/analyse non-verbal communication, and interplay between physical examination, needling and talk
- Limited number of patients due to time-frame and resources to transcribe/analyse
- BUT, we see our findings as preliminary hypotheses for future research
Conclusions

- Self-care support and advice was integral to the practice of traditional acupuncture.
- *It was individualised in terms of the patient’s life-world and/or the Chinese medicine diagnosis.*
- The co-construction of self-care talk did not replicate the asymmetry of conventional medical consultations.
- *This may be useful as a basis for developing an explicit role for acupuncture in health promotion and the everyday self management of long-term conditions.*
Our reflections on this project

- Useful research doesn’t have to be fantastically complicated or expensive.
- Recording ourselves isn’t so scary after all, and our patients didn’t mind it either.
- Listening to recordings and analysing the data with researchers made us more aware of what we do:
  a) how we use the diagnosis to construct individualised self-help regimes
  b) how much ‘life-world’ talk is actually used to build rapport or test emotions
  c) by putting the diagnosis into a framework that was relevant to the patient, strengthens the impact of the advice.
The researchers?

- Listening to the tapes they learned that an acupuncture consultation is ‘multi-layered’ as well as a ‘complex intervention’.

- One researcher has decided to undertake the acupuncture training!